

Sioux City groups work for Great Places designation

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By Bret Hayworth
Journal staff writer

Sioux City won't be left out in the attempt by various areas of Iowa to be recognized as a Great Place in a new state initiative.

Three places possessing unique characteristics will be picked to be improved and promoted, and a few Sioux City groups will work cooperatively to have downtown Sioux City named a Great Place.

The last of 10 public forums explaining the process of becoming one of the three Great Places was held at the downtown Sioux City Martin Ballroom Thursday.

The forums, including one in Spencer last month, have been attended by at least 1,000 Iowans. Those wanting to push an area for Great Places designation have until July 1 to contact the state.

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Dakin Schultz, Merville, and an employee of Iowa's Department of Transportation, talks with other people at his table prior to the Great Places presentation by Iowa's

Department of Cultural Affairs director Anita Walker Thursday at the Martin Tower's Ballroom in Sioux City. (Staff photo by Jerry Mennenga)

Great Places: New approach to state help

By Bret Hayworth
Journal staff writer

Invitations?
Coaches?

The Great Places endeavor is touted to promote bold thought, and one of the most striking aspects of Great Places is the new-style nomenclature.

Moving from the governmentese of acronyms and lingo only a civil servant could love, Great Places goes to the other extreme.

Those areas wanting to be designated as one of the three pilot Great Places in Iowa are requested to send an "invitation," not an application, by July 1. Those who submit the invitations, then will have "coaches" help them flesh out the proposals through late summer. And the three pilot areas chosen by the Great Places Citizen Advisory Board will have the use of a "team" of state agencies, pro-

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The forum drew representatives from several towns, including Le Mars, Sioux Center, Onawa, Mapleton, Carroll and Manning. Under the leadership of Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs director Anita Walker, the attendees were encouraged to name national places that fit the Great Places bill, having a unique feel or sense of place as a combination of natural resources or manmade entities.

Places like New York City, Williamsburg, Va. and Mount Rushmore were brainstormed, and Kingsley, Iowa, resident Julie Hlas mentioned Seattle, for its standing as "a culturally, socially rich area." Taking it down to Iowa, the people mentioned Great Places possibilities as the Loess Hills, Amana Colonies, the Grotto of Redemption near West Bend and Valley Junction in Polk County, for its unique shops.

Then the list got more parochial. Downtown Partners executive director Roger Caudron mentioned Sioux City, particularly for the restored Orpheum Theater, which he called "the classiest place to see a show in the Midwest."

After the forum, Caudron said Downtown Partners would be working with the Siouxland Chamber of Commerce, city of Sioux City and the Sioux City Growth Organization, a group of young professionals, to put forth downtown Sioux City as a possible Great Place.

Caudron said the invitation to pick Sioux City would be "based on downtown as the centrality of the application." While Walker said it was conceivable a place like Sioux City could have several projects, Caudron said he wasn't sure if other Sioux City groups might put forth a competing Great Places area.

Caudron said the proposal may not be limited to downtown, but might have "tentacles" to farther away areas like the riverfront, Sergeant Floyd Monument and Trinity Heights. Caudron said "I'm a little biased," but said he thinks Sioux City could fare well in the hands of the Great Places Citizen Advisory Board. "There are more great places in Iowa, and we just feel we are the greatest," he said. "We are a destination, one of the better kept secrets in Iowa."

To date, only one area has sent in an invitation to be considered a Great Place. But Walker said she expects many, and said with the July 1 deadline, "they will all come in on June 30."



Walker



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Invitation

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viding help to promote the unique aspects of the special areas in order to increase awareness.

Yet more of what Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs director Anita Walker called the “new vocabulary of Great Places?”

The first year of the Great Places initiative is a “learning laboratory,” and even those areas not selected to be Great Places should learn about their strengths and weaknesses, enabling backers to make changes for the future.

Great Places is being run under the lead of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs. Walker called the endeavor “one of the most exciting, unprecedented initiatives to come out of state government.”

The program looks to break the mold of government putting down too-confining guidelines, she said, and as the three pilot programs are picked by September, “we don’t even like the word ‘criteria’” for how they will be chosen.

All the flowery language aside, Great Places looks to show the unique places of Iowa, and won’t be constrained by typical city or county borders, something that has hampered some places that spill over such man-made boundaries. The goal is to demystify government and make it easier to tap into the financial and technical resources of 18 state agencies to promote quality-of-life projects like the Loess Hills or a unique ethnic metro area, Walker said.

The Great Places Citizen Ad-

What is a Great Place?

They embrace the sense of place, the spirit that emanates from an authentic identity. A great place connects its heart and soul — a lake, arts district, history, culture — with its trails and streetscapes and housing and parks. And it connects with you.

Great places can be pretty or gritty, high arts or street-corner strange. Their power, their greatness, lies in their ability to turn a visit or a residence into an experience.

— Source: Great Places Web site, iowagreatplaces.gov

visory Board will be looking at seven criteria — strike that, “dimensions” — in pinpointing the three pilot areas: a unique sense of place, engaging experiences, rich social fabric, vital economy, pleasing environment, strong foundation and creative culture.

Raised as a possibility by Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack, Great Places was created by the governor via an executive order and later ratified by the Legislature. However, the Legislature didn’t provide the \$8 million Vilsack sought; the state agencies instead will have about \$300,000 to provide to the three Great Places. The local entities are to put in their own money as well.

Walker said projects with broad community input will be sought, rather than those with “just the Chamber (of commerce) and city administrator” support. She said a lesson learned from the Vision Iowa program that divided more than \$200 million in state funding is that good quality-of-life projects result from combining state and local resources.